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## Sources: White House OKd contra supply network

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WASHINGTON — A controversial program to coordinate private aid to anti-Sandinista rebels through the National Security Council was approved by officials in the White House, according to several current and former administration officials.

The sources said that Robert McFarlane, who was then national security adviser, personally reviewed the memorandums that suggested setting up a private supply network for the rebels in the event Congress suspended official funding.

One source said that McFarlane briefed President Reagan on the proposal and that Reagan verbally approved the idea in the spring of 1984. Other sources said they did not know if Reagan was aware of the plan.

McFarlane denied last week that any such plan was presented to him. The sources said the decision to set up the supply network came when the administration was still legally permitted to aid the contras.

But the sources said that Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the NSC's deputy director of political-military affairs, continued to oversee the network after Congress banned U.S. contact with the contras after Oct. 10, 1984, and cut off funding.

Legislative critics of President Reagan's Nicaragua policy are scrutinizing North's role in support of the contras and it could be a target of a congressional investigation expected to begin after this week's House vote on an administration request for an additional \$100 million in contra aid.

Rep. Ron Coleman, D-Tex., announced Saturday in the Democratic Party reply to Reagan's weekly radio address that he will introduce a resolution of inquiry in Congress this week directing the White House to provide information and documents on North's activities.

North's role was revealed in press accounts last summer, but until now it had not been disclosed how the supply system developed after Congress suspended aid in 1984.

North declined comment but several other administration officials insisted that the NSC staffer had not circumvented the ban on contra assistance, which was re-

laxed Aug. 8, 1985, when Reagan signed into law a \$27 million program of "humanitarian" assistance.

According to two current administration officials and three former officials, all familiar with contra affairs, North designed the stand-in assistance plan in early 1984, eight or nine months before Congress actually banned the aid, but several months after Congress first limited U.S. action on behalf of the contras.

A former intelligence officer who has dealt with North said McFarlane "assigned" the NSC aide to carry out the mission.

The other sources said that Edwin Meese, who was then White House counselor, also knew of the proposal, along with CIA Director William Casey and several State Department officials who coordinated Nicaragua policy with the NSC.

McFarlane, currently a researcher and lecturer at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, denied that he knew of such a plan. He declined to provide details of NSC activities with the contras.

"At no time was any such plan ever presented to me by Col. North or anyone else," McFarlane said. "Nor did I ever discuss any such concept with anyone."

Casey and Meese, currently U.S. attorney general, had no comment.

Presidential spokesman Larry Speakes said at a recent briefing that the White House investigated North's activities and concluded that he did not engage in any illegal acts.

Administration officials said the investigation was conducted by then-White House legal counsel Fred Fielding. Fielding, now a lawyer for a public relations firm, did not return phone calls.

Administration officials familiar with the probe said it determined that North, the White House and the NSC did nothing improper because their activities occurred before the Oct. 10 ban.

Congressional aides familiar with the ban agreed that if the administration set up the private network before Oct. 10 no illegalities occurred. But they said questions still remain about North's role after Oct. 10, 1984.

The sources said North's proposal was not an action plan, but papers discussing a number of

scenarios in case Congress cut off aid. They said the scenarios apparently included one involving private donations.

One former senior official said North's scenarios were based on discussions involving high level officials at the White House, NSC and CIA on the future of contra aid following November 1983 congressional action directing the CIA to spend only \$24 million on the rebel program during 1984.

"As a result of the \$24 million cap, strategic officers in the administration, particularly at CIA and NSC, realized that by the

spring or summer of 1984 all official contra aid would run out," the former official said. "This triggered the search for alternate sources and the private aid. It was the logical next step."

In early 1984, Reagan asked Congress to remove the \$24 million cap but lawmakers rejected the request because of a scandal over the CIA mining of Nicaraguan harbors. It became clear then that Congress would eventually bar all aid.

In May 1984, North visited the contras in Honduras and told them that the administration would continue helping "notwithstanding the refusal of the Congress to appropriate more funds," according to ousted contra leader Edgar Chamorro.

An administration official said that when North returned to Washington he helped conservatives put together the private aid network.

A former senior official said he remembers attending three White House briefings after Oct. 10 in which Reagan and then-White House Chief of Staff James Baker said the administration intended to respect the law.

However, the source said that "by that time, Col. North was all wrapped up with the contras and it's quite possible he did not withdraw."

Another former official who worked closely with North said the NSC officer did not breach the ban but "went to the limit and consciously danced around the edge."

All sources consulted said North went beyond limited contacts and that even after Congress prohibited administration involvement he

was frequently in touch with contra officials or their supporters.

One contra official said last week that on one occasion North intervened to ensure the prompt delivery of a planeload of military supplies from an international arms dealer.

The rebel said North did not order the shipment but made telephone calls from his office adjacent to the White House to "facilitate" the arrival of the Boeing 707 cargo plane at a Central American airport.

A frequent visitor to North's office said that one evening in the spring of 1985 one of the officer's contacts, retired Army Maj. Gen. John Singlaub, called to ask whether the "humanitarian" aid Congress was about to approve could be used to buy vehicles. The source said North told Singlaub he did not know but would find out and report back.

Singlaub, former commander of U.S. forces in South Korea and self-proclaimed private contra military adviser, has said that he advised North of his activities on behalf of the rebels but did not receive guidance from the NSC.

Administration officials and contra rebels have identified Singlaub as the principal member of North's network of private operatives assisting the contras during the prohibition.

The other main private agent was Robert Owen, a Stanford political science graduate and conservative activist who until May 28 was a paid consultant to the State Department's Nicaraguan Humanitarian Assistance Office, the agency that disbursed the \$27 million in "humanitarian" aid, the sources said.